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SUBJECT: HUNGER STRIKE BY TWO TUNISIAN JOURNALISTS NOT A
CLEAR CUT HUMAN RIGHTS CASE

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Hudson; reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

1.(C) Summary: Reporters Without Borders (RWB) and International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX) recently released updates on two Tunisian journalists on hunger strike in protest of their dismissals from the nominally private, but GOT-controlled, Arabic language daily newspaper "Ash Shourouq." Although RWB and IFEX identify these journalists as human rights activists, their cases are, in reality, much less clear cut given the fact that they are both on hunger strike in hopes of being reinstated at a newspaper that is known for its close alliance with the GOT and its consistent attacks on Tunisian opposition and human rights activists. End Summary.

A Word about "Ash Shourouq"

2.(C) "Ash Shourouq" is the most widely read Arabic-language daily newspaper in Tunisia. Boasting a circulation of 80,000 (the closest competitor has only half that circulation), "Ash Shourouq" has an editorial line that is pro-GOT and extremely anti-American. At the same time that its daily headlines praise Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi "resistance," "Ash Shourouq" also frequently publishes editorials containing scandalous attacks on Tunisian opposition and human rights figures. Sources at the newspaper report that most of these editorials are sent to the newspaper directly from the Presidential Palace. While it is nominally private, it is widely known to receive editorial direction from GOT officials; its editors are frequently decorated by President Ben Ali and serve in a variety of quasi-official entities, such as the Electoral Observatory (a body created by the GOT to respond to public inquiries about Tunisian elections).

Journalists on Hunger Strike

3.(C) Two former journalists at "Ash Shourouq" are currently on hunger-strike. Slim Boukhdhir began his hunger strike on April 4, 2006, in protest of his dismissal from "Ash Shourouq," as well as the confiscation of his passport and his press card. In August 2004, Boukhdhir came to international attention when he posed a question during a local press conference implying that relatives of the President had pressured the judiciary to influence the outcome of a legal case. Following the press conference, he was allegedly assaulted by two police agents and subsequently received threatening phone calls from unknown sources. In September 2004, Boukhdhir claimed that his house was also broken into. His case was documented in the State Department

2004 Human Rights Report as an example of GOT intimidation of journalists.

4.(C) According to journalists and human rights contacts, after his run-in with the Tunisian authorities, Boukhdir found himself unable to work in Tunisia and sought assistance from noted Tunisian human rights activist, author and journalist Sihem Ben Sedrine. Ben Sedrine confirmed that she was aware of his case and invited him to work with her at her unauthorized on-line newspaper, "Kalima;" unfortunately, as "Kalima" has a minuscule budget, she could not offer him the salary that he needed to support his family. Journalists who know Boukhdir report that, at the same time, he was approached by journalists close to the GOT, who negotiated a deal in which Boukhdir would refrain from joining the ranks of the human rights activists in exchange for employment at "Al Hadath," a weekly newspaper generally considered to be the mouthpiece of the Tunisian Ministry of Interior. After a few months, again with reported GOT assistance, Boukhdir transferred from "Al Hadath" to "Ash Shourouq."

5.(C) Despite his decision to negotiate with the GOT, Boukhdir continued to have problems. Boukhdir also claims that the GOT has refused to issue him either a passport or a press card. The Tunisian Journalists Association (AJT) additionally refused to grant him a membership card, claiming that he lacked the appropriate educational qualifications for participation in the association. Characterized by other journalists as a "loose cannon," Boukhdir apparently vacillated between following the "Ash Shourouq" pro-GOT editorial line and submitting more independent articles that the "Ash Shourouq" editor refused to publish. Boukhdir meanwhile published a number of articles on Alarabiya.net that included stories on the Tunisian opposition and the October 18 hunger strike. Boukhdir reported varying examples of harassment at his work place, including being barred from

entering his office and the suspension of his salary as of November 2005. The matter came to a head on April 1, 2006, when Boukhdir published an article on Alarabiya.net that discussed "Ash Shourouq's" close ties to the GOT. He was subsequently fired (or, as some sources report, his contract was not renewed) by "Ash Shourouq," prompting him to go on hunger strike.

6.(C) On April 18, 2006, another journalist, Sheherazade Akacha, began a hunger-strike in protest of her dismissal from "Ash Shourouq." Tunisian journalists appear mystified at her sudden activism, as she has been gainfully employed at the newspaper for a few years, during which time she even denounced other journalists who were speaking out against the abusive behavior of the "Ash Shourouq" editors. According to sources at the newspaper, Akacha was dismissed last year from "Ash Shourouq" when the owner and director decided to fire staff as a cost-saving measure. The AJT intervened on her behalf and she was reinstated. According to the RWB and IFEX releases, Akacha declined to write an article for the newspaper's November 7, 2005 supplement, noting her refusal to have stories "dictated to her." A source at "Ash Shourouq" explained that Akacha refused to complete her assignment of interviewing Tunisian parliamentarians, citing her leftist political beliefs as the reason that she could not participate in such an exercise. As a result, the "Ash Shourouq" editor-in-chief asked her to fill out a questionnaire explaining her decision; Akacha refused to complete the form and instead sent it to "TunisNews," an independent opposition website based in Europe. The source at "Ash Shourouq" explained that a decision was then taken by the "Ash Shourouq" editorial staff to allow Akacha's contract to run its course without renewing it. Akacha's contract expired on April 18, when she began her hunger strike.

Comment

7.(C) Ben Sedrine, RWB, and IFEX maintain that these ongoing hunger strikes are a direct result of the lack of freedom of expression in Tunisia. This is true to the extent that the GOT control of the press forces local journalists to conform

strictly to pro-GOT editorial lines at the same time that it restricts the creation of new media outlets that could serve as alternatives for Tunisian media professionals who wish to change jobs. This situation is also exacerbated by the fact that "Ash Shourouq" is controlled by officials in the GOT and ignores any ethical responsibility of allowing diversity of opinion or a separation of reporting and editorial lines.

8.(C) It is important to note that both of these journalists are in a delicate position of having waited until their contracts expired to begin protests against "Ash Shourouq" and hoping to be reinstated at this newspaper known for its close relations with the GOT and attacks on human rights activists. Tunisian journalists and outside observers, including those members of IFEX who recently visited Tunisia, additionally note that it is not unusual that a newspaper would refuse to renew the contract of journalists who do not wish to write in accordance with the media outlet's editorial line and that journalists cannot realistically demand to have contracts renewed under such conditions.

HUDSON